

SKY CITY I, Louise Nevelson, American (b. Russia), 1957, Painted Wood Construction, #L2006.183a-e



Gallery label: Louise Nevelson is for her wall pieces constructed of boxes filled with found wooden forms. They are almost always painted in a single color, which further draws the objects together into a unified whole and endows them with a sense of mystery. Nevelson began exploring this type of construction in the 1940's, working primarily with found objects as assemblages.

In 1957, the artist received a box of wine as a holiday gift. Its partitioned compartments inspired a structural basis for her mature art work. Nevelson worked intuitively and spontaneously, stacking the boxes of found objects in an entirely novel approach to sculpture.

QUESTIONS:

1. What are your first impressions looking at this sculpture?
2. What are some of the objects you can find that make up part of this work/
3. How would you feel if this sculpture had been done all in white? In gold?
4. What do you think the artist is trying to say to us as observers of her work?

KEY POINTS

1. Acclaimed by some as perhaps the most original and famous American sculptor of the 20th century, Louise Nevelson was born Leah Belikowsky in 1899 (d. 1988) in a provincial Jewish town near Kiev, Russia. Her family immigrated to the U.S. when she was five and settled in the small town of Rockland, Maine. She knew at a young age that she would be an artist. A statue of Joan of Arc at the Rockland Public Library inspired her to become a sculptor.

Quote: My theory is that when we come to this earth, many of us are ready-made. (Autobiography, DAWNS AND DUSKS)

2. Desperate to escape her family's diminished financial prospects and religious discrimination in Rockland, Louise married Charles Nevelson shortly after graduating from high school. They moved to New York City and within two years a son, Myron (Mike), was born. The marriage proved incompatible with her desire to study and practice art. She divorced Charles and—leaving Mike with her family in Maine—moved to Europe to study cubism with Hans Hofmann in Munich.
3. When the Nazis closed Hofmann's studio, she followed him back to the U.S. in 1932. In the 30's she studied at the New York Art Students League and worked in painting, sculpture, and works on paper in "an established modernistic style." She worked with or studied with Diego Rivera, Max Ernst, Alexander Calder, Andre Massou, and was influenced by the Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, and Primitive Art. Although associated with no one movement and an artist of great independence, she is considered by some to be an abstract expressionist.
4. In the 40's—rejecting the welded, metal sculptures and the political and existential themes of her male counterparts—she began to gather wooden objects on the streets of New York and transform them into compartmentalized (crated) assemblies painted in monochrome black.
Nevelson quote: *When you put together things that other people have thrown out, you are really bring them to life—a spiritual life that surpassed the life for which they were created.*
5. By the 50's and 60's she was creating the towering wooden collages that would bring her fame and an exit from poverty. She worked by improvisation in a quick intuitive manner that was surprising given the resulting harmonious and impressive works. Critics remarked that her walls of black wood collage "did not look like sculpture at all, but something like environments or stage sets or grandly cluttered closets or tool sheds."
Nevelson quote: *I attribute the walls to this: I had loads of energy. I mean energy and energy and loads of creative energy...I identify with the ocean. So I began to stack my sculptures into an environment. It was natural. It was a flowing of energy.*
6. Monochrome black had a special meaning for Nevelson. Black was a way to transform intimately selected individual objects to a grander scale resulting in a holistic single sculpture and a new "environment". One critic said "monochrome neutralizes idiosyncratic details, harmonizes disparate elements, and transforms the common and mundane into objects of mystery." However, she also created monochrome "assemblies" in white and gold although the gold sculptures did not receive the same critical interest and acclaim as black and white.
Nevelson quote: *Black contained all colors...It was an acceptance...Black is the most aristocratic of all.*
7. Collected wooden "found" objects painted monochrome colors became a style that she would amplify for the rest of her career: scale (small to room size to outdoor), color (black to white to gold) and imagery (personal to cultural to universal). By the 60's she had reached her goals to be a famous artist and a leader in the world of art.
8. Later in her career many of her creations moved beyond the wall to fill entire rooms or outdoor spaces, e.g. the famous Chapel of the Good Shepard at St. Peter's Church in

New York done all in monochrome white or Dawns' Wedding Feast also in monochrome white which consisted of four wedding chapels complete with bride and groom and wedding cake. She also donated several works fashioned in steel to the streets of New York City. Night Presence IV stands on a median at 92nd Street and Park Avenue and a complete environment is installed at Louise Nevelson Plaza in the Financial District in Lower Manhattan (restored in 2007). (A third public work was located at the World Trade Center and destroyed in the September 11 attack). With works such as these, Nevelson also has been recognized as a predecessor to installation art movement.

9. Nevelson was a trailblazer who enjoyed the celebrity of being an artist. Her mink eyelashes, dramatic clothing and colorful headscarves were an important part of her personal style. She was a key leader in the New York art scene and a globally recognized and collected artist. She influenced the work of William de Kooning and many others and helped shape the direction of abstract expressionism, minimalism and feminist art.

Awards and recognition include:

Cover of Life magazine 1958

National Medal of Art 1985

US Commemorative Postage Stamp 2000

Jewish Museum retrospective exhibit 2007